



## Redeveloping the Heart of Historic Portland at Old Port Square

Laura Rote



The tower will include new residences and a hotel, culminating in a timber-and-glass pavilion with a publicly accessible sky lobby and lookout inspired by the region's many lighthouses. The team plans to use bird-friendly glass for its design. Rendering courtesy of Safdie Architects

### Story at a glance:

- The Old Port Square project is set to include Portland, Maine's tallest building—45 Union Street tower. Construction is planned to begin in 2028.
- Building materials chosen for 45 Union Street and its surroundings reflect the area's heritage, from local Maine granite and brick to plentiful timber.

Life is returning to the [Old Port Square](#) district at the heart of historic Portland after decades of underutilization. The area suffered from the so-called urban renewal of the '60s and '70s that killed many downtowns for decades, transforming them into unapproachable megablocks, according to

Jacob Soley, director of development at East Brown Cow in Portland. The area was largely fenced off from the '80s until 2009 when [East Brown Cow](#), the real estate developer, first bought property within the four-acre site.

Soley, a self-described history buff, is excited about the ongoing revitalization and the opportunity to bring people back to home base. The location is the center of the creation of the city dating back to the mid-to-late 1600s. “You’re at the nexus of where the energy of the city has been for all these centuries,” he says.

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Today Old Port Square is well on its way to being a proper community hub again, hosting food trucks, live music, mobile vendors, and more in warmer months. “We really want to draw the energy in and through the site and break down the scale of that big megablock, preserving the existing street edges and the scale but extending pedestrian pathways and creating courtyards and spaces that are more in keeping with the scale of that historic Old Port fabric,” Soley says.



The entrance to the residential and hotel lobbies at 45 Union Street connect to the pedestrian network. The tower is elevated on slender columns to provide breathing room for outdoor public spaces. Rendering courtesy of Safdie Architects

Architects, developers, and city officials have been working together for years to develop the square thoughtfully, from removing physical barriers to thoughtfully planning to bring people to the site in meaningful ways that also respects area history. Larger projects—including a design for what will be Portland’s tallest building, the 30-story 45 Union Street tower—are an exciting opportunity that is also challenging.

“You have to be especially sensitive to what happens at the ground floor,” says Sean Scensor, [Safdie Architects](#) senior partner in charge of the 45 Union Street project. “You have to make sure the bases of the buildings are very transparent and accessible with public access.”

Walkability and access are key, Scensor says, to designing successful, sustainable places people want to be in, whether that’s the tower itself or Old Port Square at large. “You want it to be activated, you want a mix of uses, you want it to thrive at all times of the day and all different seasons, so you have to encourage that sort of micro activation, micro use, and avoid what happened before where you had to circumnavigate the block,” he says, calling back to the time of fences.



The Canal Plaza courtyard will merge indoor and outdoor with inviting cafés, lobbies, and pedestrian pathways. Rendering courtesy of Safdie Architects

Scensor says the design team, which includes Michael Boucher Landscape Architecture and Pentagram, aims to bring people in to experience the block at a much more intimate and smaller scale using landscaping and street furniture in addition to appropriate, approachable pathways.

“We’ve been working on this project with the client for almost 10 years,” Scensor says. “This isn’t just a tower project. It’s a long-term urban revitalization of the whole district. We’ve been going slowly and with care and sensitivity to re-stitch together the fabric from the damage created by mid-20th century urban renewal.”

The design for 45 Union Street features a slender tower set back from the street, using textures and materials—stone, timber—with historic context. The tower will include new residences and a hotel, culminating in a timber-and-glass pavilion with a publicly accessible sky lobby and lookout inspired by the region’s many lighthouses.

“Having grown up here, there’s an honesty and unpretentiousness around materiality in Portland surrounding architecture and the urban landscape,” Soley says. “That what the material is, what a building is, is obvious and clear and forthright in its architectural vocabulary.”



Construction on the 45 Union Street tower in Old Port Square is expected to begin in 2028. Rendering courtesy of Safdie Architects

That notion is seen in the local materials and architectural elements chosen for 45 Union Street and its surroundings. Local Maine granite and brick pave a lot of the outdoor public spaces while timber speaks volumes in the tower design. “Maine has a long history of wood craftsmanship and forestry so there’s constant iterative thinking around how to leverage local craftsmanship and materials in a way that feels genuine and true to Portland,” Soley says.

Portland is known for its strong, robust architecture, Scensor says, with durable materials that will last a long time and stand up to the sea. The team at Safdie is committed to incorporating those materials alongside energy-efficient choices. “We’ve been looking at using insulated translucent glass claddings or external screens or louvers to cut down on the solar heat gain,” he says. “It’s this combination of integrating modern materials that are higher performing with some of the more very contextual, robust, durable materials that you see throughout the larger Old Port neighborhood.”

The team plans to use [bird-friendly glass](#) on the new tower, too. “There are so many different layers and aspects to choosing the materials and testing them and seeing what makes sense. We’ve been doing a lot of studies—wind studies, energy modeling, and looking at how daylight penetrates the building to try to get the balance right. It’s not just quantitative; it’s also a sort of qualitative judgment about how materials make you feel and how we can create a warm, pedestrian-friendly, good urban design at all levels,” Scensor says.

A challenge for everyone involved has been balancing density and activation with protecting the area's history and keeping that authentic, small city feel, Scensor says. "How do you get that balance right? How do you bring a richness of experience and the environment and not be overwhelming to the historic fabric? How can you be in dialogue with history?"

Scensor says the firm has learned a lot from their own projects in other parts of the world, from Singapore to Montreal to Savannah. "We've done very contextual historic interventions in those cities that we think really enriched the sense of place there, even incorporating contemporary structures and more density into the historic context, so that's been instructive," he says. "We've learned from our experiences, but I think that's quite a challenge, striking that balance. If you get it right, it's what people love about cities. It's that there's action and activity and this ability to have a rich social experience by being in proximity with each other. There are a lot of unexpected and joyful moments that come out of that that we hope to be setting the stage for."

Construction on the 45 Union Street tower is expected to begin in 2028. Also on the site, Safdie previously completed the [Old Port Square Garage](#), one of the first solar-powered garages in Maine, and local architects completed two adaptive reuse projects of 19th century historic buildings, converting them into ground level retail and [The Docent's Collection](#). A two-and-a-half megawatt solar farm in Sidney, Maine, offsets most of the electrical power needs within Old Port Square.

As plans for 45 Union Street continue, Soley says a great building is one that stands the test of time. "When we're gone we want this to be something that has made a statement and has been thoughtfully created within the urban fabric that exists here in Portland."

Scensor says the team thinks on a generational timeline, whether that's at Old Port Square or on any other project. "In this day and age longevity itself is a kind of sustainability. Every structure carries an environmental cost, so we have to be very careful and intentional and disciplined about what we choose to build."